

Inviting God to Show Up

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Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ
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John 20:19-31

Today we are beginning a worship series called Unraveled – Seeking God When All Our Plans Fall Apart. This is actually a series that I had considered doing for Lent this year, when instead we embraced the theme of wilderness. Now, several weeks into the Coronavirus pandemic and all that has come with it, unraveled can describe what we see daily in our world. Schools have shut down, businesses have closed, jobs are disappearing, normal activities curtailed for who-knows-how-long, and many have family and friends on the front lines of helping people who are getting sick from this virus.

Unraveling of our society of this magnitude hasn't happened for decades, and for many of us, this is by far the biggest unraveling in our lifetime. And as adults grapple to understand and begin to respond to its implications, our youth and children are affected as well. Why is school closed and I have to do all this homework? Why can't we go anywhere? Why can't I play with my friends? Why is in-person college shut down already for this fall?

It's a lot, right? And I especially feel for those whose jobs are impacted and those who have a number of family members to care for, or an illness you are already dealing with.

As we look at the scripture from the gospel of John, I want to repeat something that I said on Easter – that on the day, the resurrection of Jesus was a confusing affair, and that what we think of Easter day played out in the days and weeks afterwards as Jesus' followers heard the news and saw Jesus.

This year, the story of Thomas has some additional resonance – for the disciples are behind closed and locked doors when Jesus makes his initial appearance to everyone except Thomas (after appearing to Mary Magdalene that morning). We, who feel the need to shelter away from others, we who are facing real things to be scared about, yes, this year the story is all too real.

One thing that we might not appreciate in the story is the fact that because Jesus (his incarnational self with body) is resurrected, that means there is no body. And for the Jewish authorities, it represents a big problem. Jesus died as a martyr, that is bad enough. The only thing worse than a martyr is a martyr without a dead body (see the story of Elijah in the Old Testament).

The disciples probably knew that the temple authorities would not be pleased at the disappearance of Jesus' body, and that they would become the targets of those in power.

After all, the blind man that Jesus had healed had been thrown out of the synagogue when he testified that Jesus was the Christ, and about his newfound sight. They knew that Jesus had told them that they might be similarly put out of the synagogues because believing in Jesus was no respite from bad things happening.

They were afraid that although Jesus had appeared to them (except for Thomas), that his power was gone. Locked up tight, they sat and stewed, perhaps wondering if their own martyrdom was not far off.

Curiously, I don't think it is the doubts of Thomas that are a problem for either the rest of the disciples or even Jesus. Thomas doesn't get a reprimand from the other disciples, who, after all, had seen Jesus for themselves. If we think about it, the fact that they, the ones who had seen Jesus, are huddled behind a locked door isn't exactly the kind of witness to the resurrection that we might hope for. Jesus appears once to the disciples and gives them a commission of peaceful relations, receiving the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness of sins. But it hasn't taken. They are still in the middle of a room on the "eighth day." Where is that new experience of transformed lives for him to observe? If they are so paralyzed by the realities of their situation, why should Thomas have faith? What would such a puny faith be defined by, anyway?

What Jesus says

Rather than judge Thomas, I'd like you to think about how Thomas is a model for our discipleship today. Upon hearing about the appearance of Jesus beyond the locked door, Thomas uttered his concerns honestly. There was no prevarication about him trying to pretend with Jesus about where he was. His doubts were out there to be looked at and tested. Contemporary writer Kathleen Norris writes that in her time of unbelief she was startled by an old Benedictine monk who told her that "doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow."¹

When I hear Thomas' demand, the Old Testament's cries to God ring in my ears. I do not hear impertinence; I hear lament. I hear a deeply biblical, deeply faithful relationship with the living God. I hear an expectation that God is alive, that God is powerful, that God cares for God's people. I hear a plea for God to show up again from someone who knows the many ways God has shown up for God's people in the past. Testimony and hope are integral parts of the genre of lament. We should not imagine that because it is Easter, we must shut our "how long, O Lords" in the box where we kept the "alleluias" during Lent.

1 Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books: New York, NY, 1998), 63.

Then Jesus comes to him and lets him see and touch. I find this such an intimate act, touching the places where he has been wounded – his hands, his side. A real change comes over Thomas in this experience. He experiences the cost of discipleship.

If you have ever made a pilgrimage to a place where people have lost their lives for something they believed in, you might have an inkling of this kind of experience. A few years ago I visited the house of Anne Frank in Amsterdam. As it happened, the hotel that the group I went with was staying nearby, and early one morning I went and took the tour of the house, and the locked rooms where they stayed hidden for years. Several times along the tour I was the only one in a particular room, the place where they stayed in hiding until they were betrayed and taken to a concentration camp where Anne died shortly before the end of World War II. It was a deeply moving experience. Equally moving was the memorial just around the corner, where a series of pink triangles noted the loss of life for those who were oppressed for their sexual orientation, also during World War II. It was right around the corner from the Frank house. Two different experiences, linked by a common hatred.

Thomas experiences the cost of the discipleship, and the miraculous victory over death. Overcome by all of this, he makes a confession of faith beyond that of any of the disciples to this point, he blurts out “My Lord and My God!” What started off as unbelief, has, through the touching of the wounds, become a bedrock belief for Thomas. Through the working through of his doubts, he becomes the leader of the gathered disciples.

When we move through our doubts, when we take the risks of experiencing the very difficult stuff of death and resurrection, we are transformed, and we are set on a new journey. We can no longer stay in a room with the door shut.

It's gotten me to wondering about how our faith might be shaped as we are sheltering behind doors, when the thing that we thought our lives would be is transformed by the experience of what has really happened. What connections can we make to help each other through fear and doubt? What help might we need to ask for? What might we need to ask of God in these times?

Friends, we go through this with God and each other. Let's show up in the best possible way! Amen.